

Roy
DeCarava



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The Nation's Capital in Photographs, 1976

Roy DeCarava

FEBRUARY 14—MAY 9, 1976

THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON, D.C.

The Nation's Capital in Photographs, 1976 is an unprecedented Bicentennial project originated by The Corcoran Gallery of Art. Eight eminent American photographers have been invited to spend extended periods—at least a month—in Washington, D.C. during 1975-76 to photograph the city, its environs and people, as each was guided by his own vision. Thus we hoped to achieve a diversified documentation of a place and time. A selection of four prints by each artist is to be earmarked for exhibition at the Corcoran in the Tricentennial year 2076.

The participating artists, each shown separately, two at a time in four stages throughout the year 1976, are LEWIS BALTZ, San Francisco; JOE CAMERON, Washington, D.C.; ROBERT CUMMING, Los Angeles; ROY DECARAVA, New York City; LEE FRIEDLANDER, New City, New York; JOHN GOSSAGE, Washington, D.C.; JAN GROOVER, New York City; and ANTHONY HERNANDEZ, Los Angeles.

The artists were selected by Chief Curator Jane Livingston and Assistant Curator Frances Fralin. As organizers of this series of exhibitions they have been responsible for the complete task of scheduling and working with the artists at every stage of the project's long development, and for producing the eight catalogues. I wish to express my special appreciation to them and to each of the eight artists for their unstinting cooperation.

The exhibition is supported by grants from the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation, Washington, D.C., and the National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, D.C., a Federal agency.

ROY SLADE
Director

On the evening of January 12, 1976, Jane Livingston and Frances Fralin interviewed Roy DeCarava in Washington, D.C. His work for *The Nation's Capital in Photographs*, 1976 had been reviewed that day by the artist and the Corcoran curators. Some excerpts from that interview follow.

[Roy DeCarava was born in New York City in 1919. From 1938-1944 he studied painting. He began making photographs in 1946. In 1952 he was the first black artist to win a Guggenheim Fellowship; in 1955 he participated in the Museum of Modern Art's *Family of Man* exhibition and, the same year, published a book with Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. He presently lives and works in Brooklyn, and teaches at Hunter College.]

Q: *What happens to your work when you're cast into a strange environment? For example, coming to Washington.*

RD: There was a feeling of pressure—I was placed here and thought, "This is it. This is where you're going to work." And that was exciting. The fact that you've got to work, there's no fooling around. It was scary as hell. But the locale itself isn't that important. I feel at home, in a photographic sense, almost anywhere I am.

Q: *This group of photographs is so successful—and you said earlier that you feel it is a kind of culmination of a long period in your work.*

RD: Yes, and it came so easily. I was thinking as I printed these that I'm either very good or no good at all. I wondered how it could be this good, because how can you get good work without this great inside upheaval, tearing and searching and struggle?

Q: *How do you know in the process when you're getting good work?*

RD: It has an intensity. When it hits, when I've arrived at a subject, it's in the center, not off-sides, you can't escape it. There's nothing superfluous in it. It functions in all areas of the

rectangle, to a point at the center of your feeling about the subject.

To me the most important thing about photography is discovering the subject.

Q: *Does it discover you or do you discover the subject?*

RD: You leave yourself open. I don't plan. I try not to feel the necessity to go somewhere to photograph something. I sort of open my pores from the time I start out. It may happen right next to me. I may respond to something, visually, intellectually or however. It's scary because it's unknown, there's no guarantee when you go out that you will be receptive or that you will find anything.

Sometimes, I feel that almost anywhere I am I can find a photograph. The catch is that one wants to find things that are intense and meaningful. One can find photographs almost anywhere; then it's a question of value.

Q: *For years you took it upon yourself, almost singlehandedly, to encourage black photographers in America. One feels to some degree, compared to your earlier work, a softening or mellowing in your approach to the issue of blackness in your photography. Do you think this is fair to say?*

RD: There is a mellowing and I think it is partly because I have succeeded in doing what I wanted to do in terms of black consciousness. In a sense I worked my way through that aspect of it, in which I felt there was a kind of urgency because it had never been done. I decided that I would have to do it because there was no one else doing it. Now I've done it. So that I'm freer than I was ten years ago because I accomplished what I wanted to do. At that time it was very conscious. Now I don't think about it. I know it's there and I'm not afraid that it won't come through.

But I would have liked to show photographs in the fifties that people weren't ready for then. Steichen's idea of the *Family of Man* did not admit violence or any sense of separation. In fact, he didn't use several of my stronger photographs. His concept of the "Family of Man" was relationships without struggle. To him the "Family of Man" meant peace and harmony in the most literal sense.

Q: *Very often, let's face it, artists are not the best judges of their own work. But in photographs the very process of selection for printing makes it essential for the artist to know what's good from what isn't.*

RD: I find I'm a good judge of my own work. But in this Washington thing, the time element was so tight; usually I like to leave up to six months' gestation period between shooting and final printing. In this case, the first selection I made was good. But I knew I would go back and find some more. I went back and then went back again. It's like a mine.

Q: *Did you see the best photographs on the first runthrough?*

RD: No, not necessarily. Some images are slower to emerge. The photograph of the man's legs and the paper bag was one of the last I picked. The Washington Monument was one of the first.

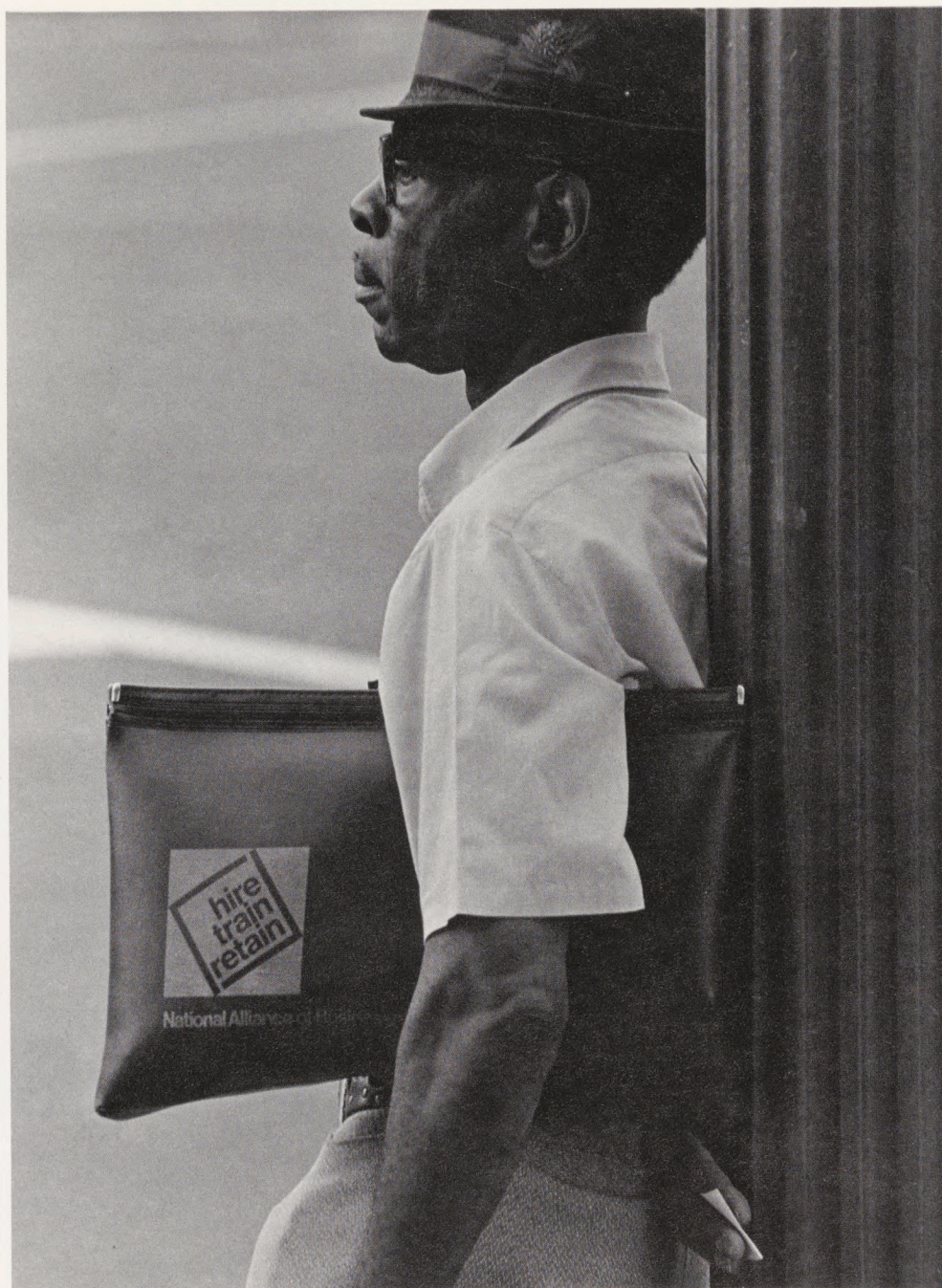
Q: *In your photographs, the detail crystallizes in an interesting way. It establishes a kind of rhythm, and you're able to apprehend the photograph in a deeper way, to get into the meaning of it. You don't do it for its own sake . . . it's not superficial.*

RD: Yes. You know what it is? You have to have an ego, but your ego must be at one with the subject. It must understand the subject and allow the subject to take over. In other words, you see something and you can force it in any number of directions, but the only force you should give it is the force that it has of itself.

Every work of art dictates its own shape, and it's up to you to force it into that which it is and strip everything else away. So that your ego comes into play as part of a thing and not on top of it. You don't take it and twist it and shove it around because you can't do that to something you love. If you love somebody, you don't want to take their face and give it plastic surgery. You just say, "Wash your face." It's the same thing with your subject. You don't overpower it. You don't show it how strong you are, how clever you are. In dealing with the thing itself in photography, you have to deal with it. It confronts you. It's not something you can leave as with a painting and go away from and return to. You've gotta deal with it. That's all there is to it.

I have a pretty good idea of where I belong in the scheme of things and I'm not the center of the universe.



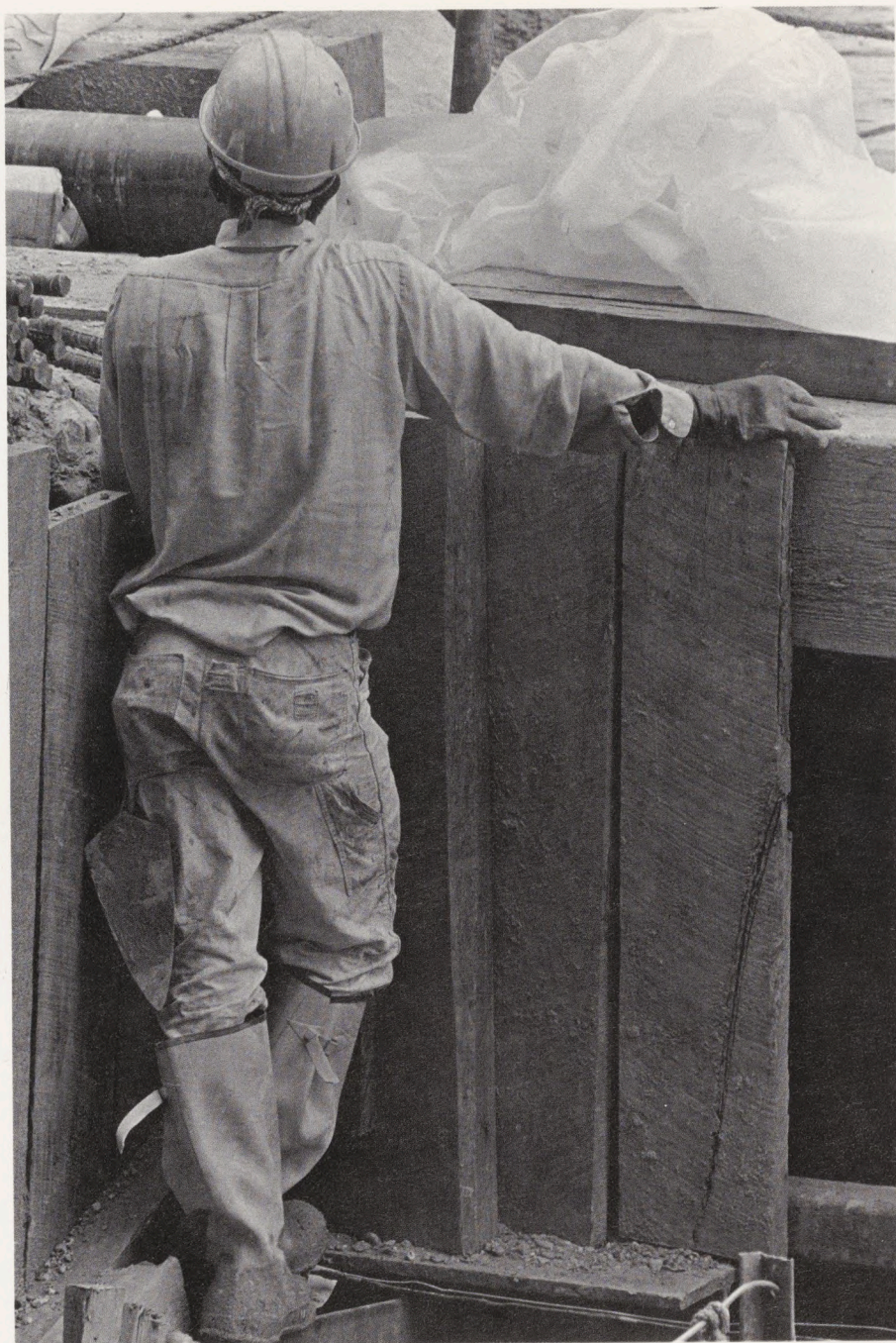


Man with Portfolio

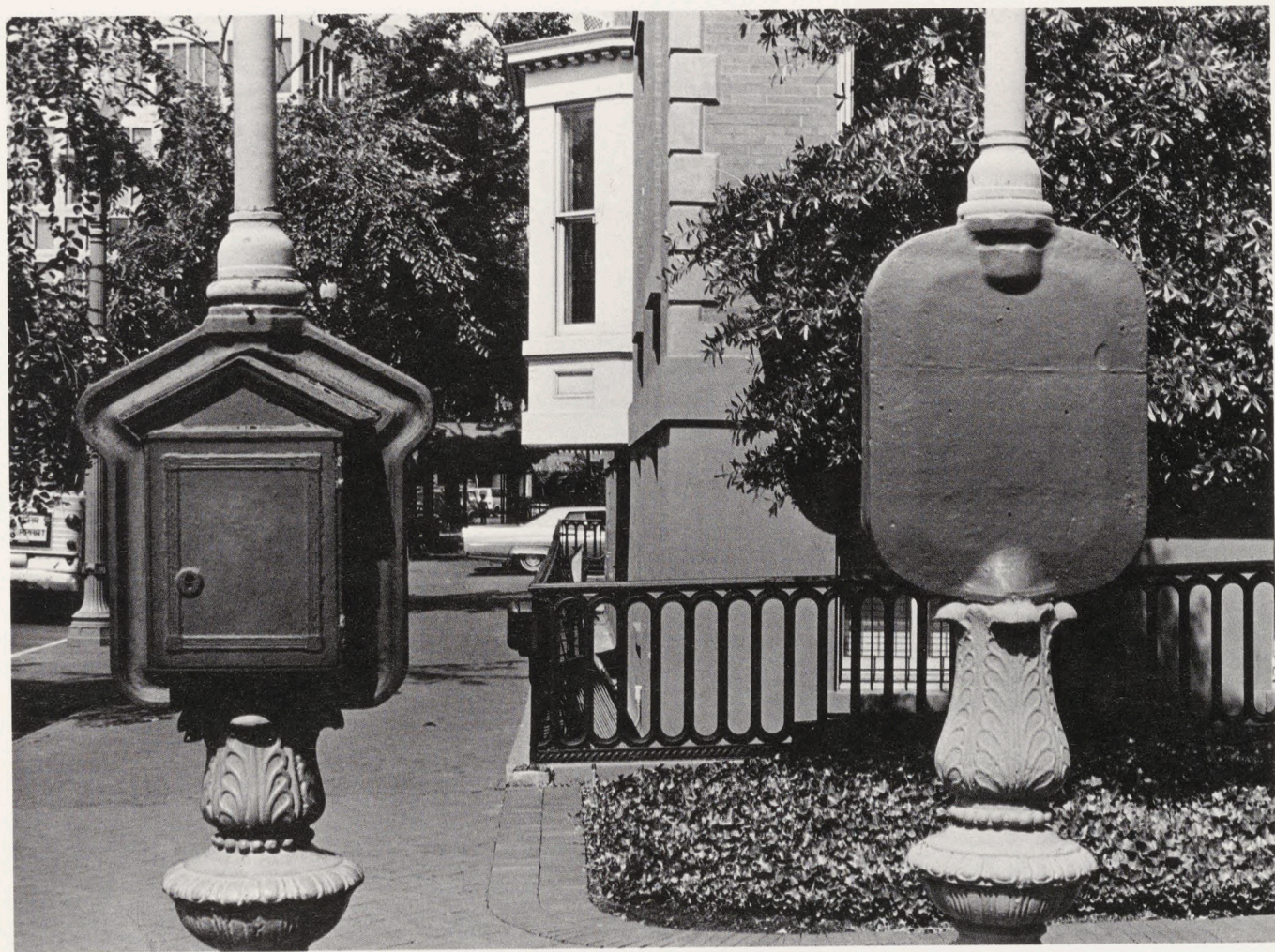








*Back of
Construction Worker*







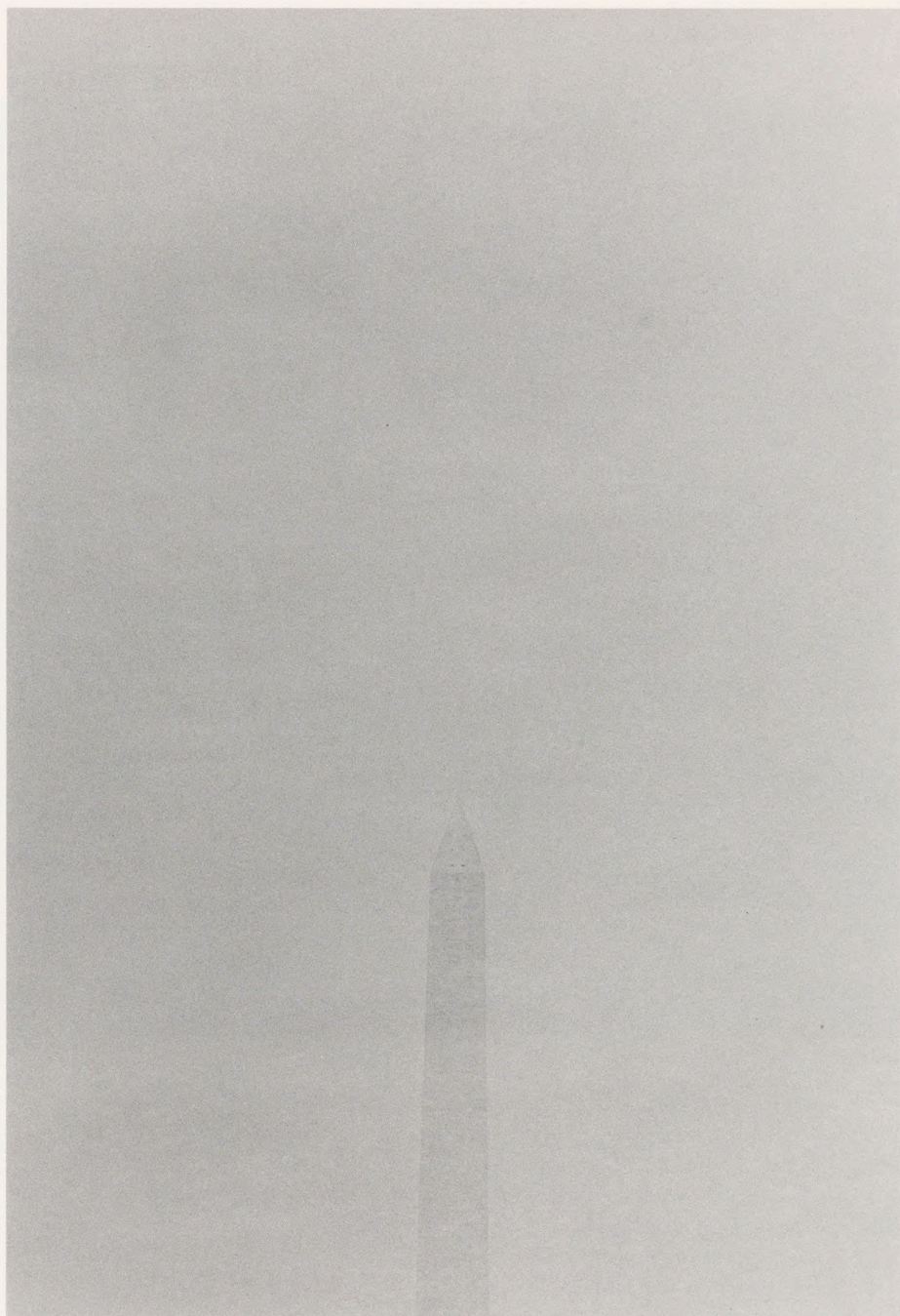


Three-Men—Two with Hands on Hips



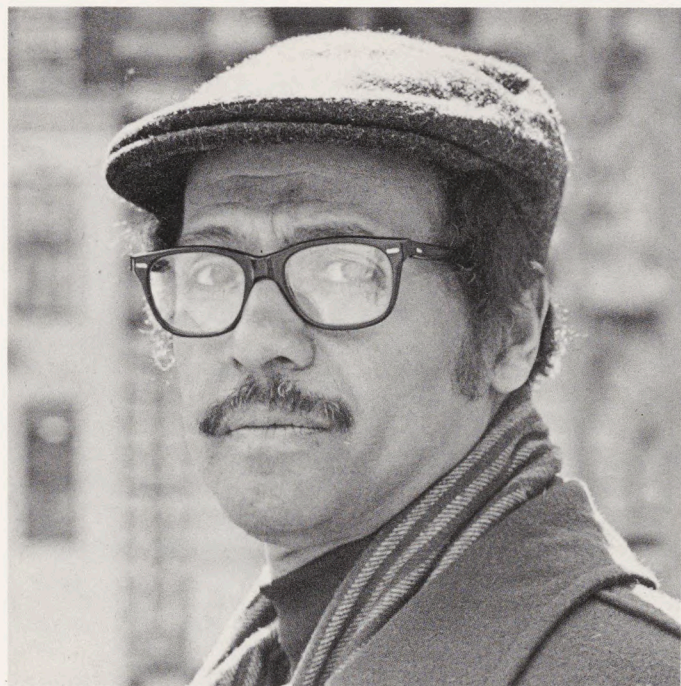


Back of Man Walking with Arms Folded



*Washington
Monument*





Photograph by Sherry Turner DeCarava

Catalogue of the Exhibition

1. Woman Braiding Man's Hair
2. Tombstones and Trees
3. Man and Girl with Hand on Face
4. Man with Portfolio
5. 9th St. & G, N.W.
6. Street Closed
7. Men Running
8. Sale, Sale
9. Children with Pony
10. Back of Construction Worker
11. Temporary Jobs
12. Bird on Drinking Fountain
13. Man Holding Child
14. Louise
15. Church Sign and Wagon
16. Slide-upon, Children's Playground
17. Firebox
18. Two Men Walking in Opposite Directions
19. Windows
20. Embroidered Blouse
21. Walking Couple with Arms Around Each Other
22. Corcoran Checkroom
23. Anti-war Demonstration
24. Five Arrows
25. Car Antenna Behind Wall
26. Buildings and Leaves
27. Back of Man Walking with Arms Folded
28. Men Walking in Corridor
29. Woman in Bus Window—7
30. Shoe Buckle
31. Three Men—Two with Hands on Hips
32. Woman with Hand on Mouth, Couple in Background
33. Asphalt Workers
34. Marble, Light, Wood
35. Four People Waiting at Bus Stop
36. Man Walking Away from a Broom
37. Washington Monument
38. Man's Legs and Paper Bag

All photographs are reproduced on 11x14 photographic paper.

